

You and Your Grief During the Holiday Season

Excerpt from an article by Alan Wolfeit, PH.D., *Thanatos* magazine, Fall 1988

With good reason, holiday seasons are often among the most difficult of times for people who have experienced the death of someone loved. Holidays are intended to be times of joy, family togetherness, gift giving, and thankfulness. Yet if someone in your life has died, holidays can also naturally bring times of sadness, loss, and emptiness.

The special occasion creates a focus for the sense of loss that is totally unlike the daily routine of living. Traditional times you have shared underscore the significance of loss – “Dad always cut the turkey while Mom took his picture for the family album.”

The full sense of loss of someone loved never occurs all at once. The onset of the holiday season often makes you realize how much your life has changed by the loss. A person who has been a vital part of your life is no longer present. You have every right to have feelings of loss, emptiness, and sadness.

Unfortunately, many people surrounding you may try to take these feelings away. Friends, family, and sometimes even professional care givers erroneously believe that their job is to distract you from these feelings. To “forget about it” or worse yet to “try to be happy” is to minimize the profound loss you have experienced.

Perhaps your major need is to acknowledge and work to survive the naturalness of “holiday grief.” Many people that I have had the privilege of working with, as well as my own experience, suggest that, for some of us, the anticipation of the holiday is sometimes worse than the day itself. This speaks of the need to plan ahead in anticipation of this vulnerable period of time.

While there are no simple guidelines to follow that will make it easy to cope with your grief during the holiday season, hopefully, the following suggestions will help you make your person experience with holiday grief more tolerable.

Talk about your grief. Some people think that not talking about thoughts and feelings of grief will make the pain go away. However, in reality you help yourself heal by finding people who will listen and help you feel understood.

Be tolerant of your inability to function at optimum levels during the holidays. Your feelings of loss will probably leave you feeling fatigued and your energy level will naturally slow down. Respect what your body and mind are telling you as you work to lower your expectations of operating at high levels of efficiency.

Eliminate unnecessary stresses. You will always feel stressed, so there is no point in over-extending or over-committing yourself. Although you don't want to isolate yourself, part of keeping your levels of stress in check is to respect your need to have time to yourself. Some people may try to "Keep you busy" in an effort to distract you from your grief. Perhaps, you too will be tempted to keep so busy that you don't think about the person who has died. Experience suggests that "keeping busy" only increases the stress and serves to postpone the need to talk out thoughts and feelings related to grief.

Be with people you find supportive and comforting. Work to identify those people around you who understand that holiday seasons heighten your feelings of loss and allow you to talk about your experience. You don't need to be around people who want you to be miserable; however, you also don't need to be around people that want you to maintain a "happy face."

Include the person's name who has died in your conversation during the holiday season. If other people sense you are able to talk about the person, it may help them recognize your need to remember the joy of having loved the person who was an important part of your life.

Do what is right for you during the holidays. Well-meaning friends and family may try to prescribe to you what you should do during the holiday season, or more specifically, on the holiday itself. These people may assume that they know what is best for you. Discuss your plans with a trusted friend who won't judge the decisions you make about how and with whom you will spend your time. Talking about these decisions out loud often helps clarify what it is you do want to do during the holidays. As you become aware of your needs, share them with your friends and family.

Do plan ahead. Decide what family traditions you want to maintain and what new ones you want to start. Knowing how you will structure your time tends to help you anticipate schedules rather than just letting things happen. During this normal painful time of grief, getting caught off guard may result in feelings of panic, fear, and anxiety. As you make your plans you may want to build in structure, yet leave room to change plans if you decide it becomes appropriate to do so.

Embrace your treasure of memories. Perhaps one of the best legacies that exists after the death of a loved one are memories. Holidays always stimulate us to think of times past. So, instead of ignoring the memories that come to you, share them with understanding family and friends. Memories are often tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, let yourself smile, and if your memories bring sadness, let yourself cry. Memories that were made in love can never be taken away from you.

Renew your resources for living. Spend time thinking about your life as it relates to meaning and purpose. The death of one loved often creates opportunities to take inventory of one's life as it relates to the past, present, and future. The combination of a holiday and the loss in your life will naturally result in self-questioning related to the meaning and purpose of life.

Express your faith. You may discover a renewed sense of long held beliefs or the evolution of a new set of beliefs during this time. Again, find people who understand your need to talk about whatever seems important for you to consider. If your faith is important to you, perhaps you will want to attend a special holiday service.

Final thoughts. As people who have been blessed with the capacity to give and receive love, we are forever changed by the experience of death in our lives. We, as humans, do not "get over" our grief, but work to reconcile ourselves to living with it. Holidays naturally bring a resurgence of intense feelings of loss and sadness. To acknowledge and move toward these feelings is healthier than attempting to repress or deny them.

Remember don't let anyone take your grief away from you during the holiday season. Try to love yourself and be embraced by surrounding yourself with caring, compassionate people!